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O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000303

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PM

SUBJECT: EMBASSY ACTS TO REPAIR RELATIONS WITH PANAMANIAN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

REF: 03 PANAMA 01281

Classified By: Ambassador William Eaton for reasons 1.4 (c), (d), and (g)

**SUMMARY**

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**¶1.** (C) Ambassador recently held two dinners linked to Islamic religious celebrations to launch an Embassy effort to help create an atmosphere of mutual respect and candid interchange and to reverse increasing local perceptions of anti-Muslim policy bias by the United States. The Ambassador's effort also responds to angry public complaints by Panamanian Muslims following their self-perceived maltreatment and abuse at U. S. ports of entry and to the reality that, for Muslim Panamanians, obtaining U.S. visas is increasingly difficult. Working-level Embassy officials also plan to meet Muslims at less ceremonial venues to discuss port-of-entry and visa issues more concretely. While we do not expect to solve the principal grievances of the Muslim participants, our sustained engagement with these communities is aimed at demonstrating U.S. respect for Muslim values.

**Who They Are, Where They Live**

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**¶2.** (SBU) Panama's Muslims (about 8,000 in all) are divided in two main national and ethnic groups, Gujarati Indians (who mainly live in Panama City) and Lebanese Arabs (who mainly live 50 miles north of the capital in the Caribbean port city of Colon). About 2500 Indians, mainly Sunni Gujaratis, generally work in retail businesses, used cars and petty trading in Panama City. Former presidential advisor Ebrahim Asvat and his architect brother, Musa, are notables of the Gujarati Muslims. The more prosperous, mainly Lebanese Arabs, (about 1000, 30% Shia, 70% Sunni, not to mention some Christians, and including some Syrians and Palestinians) overwhelmingly work in the export-import trade at the Colon Free Zone. Several thousand more Muslims of mainly Arab background live in the bigger provincial towns in the countryside west of the Canal. (Note: Several thousand middle eastern Sunni Arabs live in interior towns in Panama. They are not a subject of this message. See reftel.)

Dinners Mark Muslim Holy Days

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¶3. (SBU) To reach out to disaffected Panamanian Muslim communities and to show respect for Islam, the Ambassador held two dinners at his Residence on October 24, 2005 (for Panama City Muslims) and on January 11, 2006 (for Colon Muslims). The October dinner was configured as an iftar break fast during the month of Ramadan. The January dinner coincided with the celebration of Eid ul-Adha, which marked the end of the Hajj. Both Muslim groups expressed satisfaction, happiness, and appreciation at the dinners, remarking that a U. S. Ambassador had never invited them to the Residence before. Each community's religious leader (or "imam") was the guest of honor. Discussion at the dinners ranged from exuberant (Gujaratis) to polite (Arabs) but was non-substantive, focusing on religious themes. Participants were advised ahead of time that the Embassy is planning to follow up the largely ceremonial dinners with working-level discussions, mainly on visa and port-of-entry issues.

#### Allegations of Abuse, Discrimination

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¶4. (C) The Ambassador launched the Embassy's reconciliation effort to strengthen ties with the Panama City Gujaratis and the Colon Arabs based on mutual respect and friendship but also to engage the two communities following public allegations -- including newspaper articles -- of abusive treatment at the hands of U.S. port-of-entry officials that had begun to damage the public image of the United States in Panama. Starting in 2003-2004, according to their own accounts, many Panamanian Muslims -- often well-heeled, middle-aged businessmen, some of whom had traveled to the United States as recently as one week before they encountered trouble -- have been frustrated in their attempts to travel to the United States.

#### Next Steps

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¶5. (SBU) The Ambassador's gestures toward the two communities have helped renew the trust between them and the Embassy but they were only a beginning. For now, the Embassy has decided to follow up on these two ice-breakers with some medium-term activites:

- Organize semi-formal meetings with the Panama City and Colon communities at the working level within the next 4-6 weeks to discuss issues of mutual interest
- Meet with Muslim representatives in smaller groups, taking advantage of our renewed contacts
- Invite Muslim representatives to Embassy representational events
- Send Embassy public affairs speakers to Muslim venues
- Organize visits by the Ambassador to several of the local mosques
- Donate public affairs books to the local mosques
- Use Embassy International Visitor programs to send eligible Muslims to the United States.

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